DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 426 572 EF 005 137

AUTHOR Stewart, G. Kent
TITLE Options for Improving Rural School Facilities. Updated June 6, 1998.
PUB DATE 1998-06-06
NOTE 24p.; Originally prepared April 10, 1998, for the Invitational Conference on Rural School Facilities, Appalachia Educational Laboratory (Kansas City, MO, May 1-2, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Building Operation; *Educational Facilities Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; Long Range Planning; Marketing; *Public Schools; *Rural Schools; *School Closing; School Maintenance; School Organization

ABSTRACT

Many options exist for improving rural school facilities, among which are questions of school closure versus modernization or replacement. This report addresses the question of the future of the community rural school and how communities, school boards, and school executives can approach school improvement problems. It defines and examines various available options in the areas of facility improvements, school maintenance, building operations, and school reorganization. In addressing the issue of school closure, it lists several questions that should be answered so that the closure decision is in the best interests of the students and also supports the school district mission. The report also explores the option of reorganizing rural schools as either magnet, charter, or theme schools as well as using facilities for other educational or non-education uses. Finally, the option of marketing the rural school to students in neighboring school districts is examined. (GR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 426 572

OPTIONS FOR IMPROVING RURAL SCHOOL FACILITIES

by

G. Kent Stewart
College of Education
Kansas State University
Manhattan, Kansas

For

Invitational Conference on
Rural School Facilities
Appalachia Educational Laboratory
P.O. Box 1348
Charleston, W. Virginia 25325

April 10, 1998

Updated June 6, 1998

EF 005 137

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

G. Kent Stewart

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

OPTIONS FOR IMPROVING RURAL SCHOOL FACILITIES

G. Kent Stewart*

Options identified, adopted, and implemented to improve rural school facilities are about as varied as are the rural schools themselves. These options, usually termed choices or simply school improvements, range from routine to sophisticated. For example, an improvement may be as simple as caulking and weatherstripping windows or as expensive as replacing the plumbing and heating system. The financial commitments are vastly different, yet both constitute an improvement to the facility, both affect the instructional adequacy of the facility, and both resulted from a choice being made from a variety of available options for facility improvements.

To make selections from available options may involve consideration of questions involving school closure versus modernization or replacement. Or perhaps the choice involves consolidation with a neighboring district or perhaps splitting a geographically large sparsely populated school district into two districts. Maybe the question of how to improve the school building was born of the idea that the building in question would make an excellent charter school or other type of special purpose school.

Many decisions by local school boards grappling with questions of facility improvement involve the unusual realization that the school is destined to close if enrollment does not increase and enrollment is not likely to increase in absence of active marketing which cannot occur successfully until the school building is improved! This kind of dilemma ushers in the question of

*G. Kent Stewart is a professor of education administration and leadership in the College of Education at Kansas State University (Manhattan, KS) where he specializes in school facility planning and community relations.

magnitude of improvements. How much tax money is required to prolong the life of a school building that is victim of enrollment decline? Can enrollment be increased ethically by marketing a school to nearby communities in neighboring school districts?

Attempts to answer these kinds of school building improvement questions bring school boards, community leaders, and school executives face-to-face with the overriding question of the future of rural schools in their particular rural communities. Various responses to these questions will be explored in this important chapter.

RURAL SCHOOL DEFINED

To appreciate discussion of options for improving rural schools, readers need to understand that it is difficult to frame a definition for the term rural school. Rural in the mind of one observer may be quite different from the perception of another. Popular definitions of rural have long suggested a community of 2500 inhabitants. This common standard may be quite appropriate in some geographies yet not be at all well received in others. Sometimes argument surfaces among leaders in similar geographies.

Some leaders in communities of 2500 population flatly resent references to their communities as rural. Rather these leaders proudly state that theirs to be a small community and seldom make reference to rural. The guarded images may be reasonably well founded. For example a community may be essentially a bedroom to a nearby metropolitan center. The community may be beyond the boundary of suburbia yet its leaders tend to use the term suburb more often than rural to describe their community. The principal employment location for

inhabitants might be 20 or more miles for the community so proudly hailed as anything but rural. Conversely, leaders in other communities tout the rural nature of their community as an attractant to commuters who place high priority on living in a rural community and working in a nearby metropolitan center.

Many states, especially the less populated ones, have a lot of schools and school districts that are decidedly rural by any definition. Some of these school districts may cover 200 or more square miles yet contain only one community large enough to support a bank, grocery store, restaurant, gasoline service station, and perhaps one small general merchandise store. The student enrollment in Grades K-12 may scarcely reach 200, and the high school might enroll only 60 students. Some districts have even lower enrollments. For example, the 1994 Digest of Education Statistics[1] indicated that of over 15,000 school districts in America, nearly one-fourth (23.1%) have fewer than 300 students. Furthermore, slightly more than 75% of the districts have fewer than 2500 students in Grades K-12. The so-called large school districts — 25,000 or more students — comprise less than 2% of the nation's school districts. It is little wonder that some local stakeholders take issue with blanket application of the popular 2500 inhabitants standard to identify a school as rural.

Applying a single definition to designate rural or rural school is an open invitation to spirited debate among school leaders, community leaders, school planners, and policy makers

---

[1]Digest of Education Statistics, 1994, (Washington D.C.; Department of Education, 1994) Table 90, p 96.

including school board members and legislators. Another definition suggests that rural is:

> "Of or relating to a minority people who habitats in sparsely populated areas and are identified by a unique persistence to retain their customs, culture, and individuality in all aspects of a human, spiritual, social, economic and educational nature."[2]

There is obviously wide variance and differences in what constitutes a rural school or rural school district. These may be rural by geography, rural by population number, rural by the size of the school enrollment, or simply rural by how local leaders elect to label their schools and communities. Except in the most sparsely populated regions even the smallest rural community may be only a relatively short commute to a larger non-rural community. The term rural tends to defy a specific and certainly universally accepted definition.

Definitions absent of numbers, such as the one offered above, seem to be absent of potentially divisive debate. When planning for facility improvements stakeholders gain nothing from debating whether or not theirs is a rural school/school district. To belabor the question of definition of rural is counterproductive to achieving goals aimed at improving rural school facilities.

FACILITY IMPROVEMENTS

The most dramatic improvements to rural school facilities result from modernization of existing buildings or construction of new facilities to replace buildings too old or improperly located to justify modernization. These topics are covered quite adequately in other chapters of this book. Also covered elsewhere are the community involvement requirements and the

---

[2]Roger A. Baskerville, Toward Community Growth. (Ft. Dodge, Iowa; Arrowhead Area Education Agency, 1997) p. 20

political issues that necessarily accompany the processes of planning and implementing modernization projects and broader activity involving planning and constructing new buildings.

Readers need to be aware that the term modernization is a bit difficult to define. As appears elsewhere in this book, the term renovation is often used synonymously with modernization to denote work designed to result in major capital improvements to an existing school facility. The point to be noted is that a fairly fine line separates definitions of modernization and renovation from the somewhat narrower definition that describes maintenance.

It is not important to debate what constitutes modernization, renovation, major capital improvements, or maintenance. The important point is to identify facility improvement needs and move ahead with making the improvements. They can range from simple to complex and from those funded from annual operating funds to those requiring 20-year general obligation bonds as a funding source. Some popular improvements embrace the following kinds of projects: Site landscaping, parking lots, playground and sports field development; exterior brick and stone tuckpointing and sealing; roofing and flashing repairs; window and door replacement; heating, plumbing, air-conditioning, and electrical system updating; interior painting, window shade and ceiling tile replacement; interior lighting; floor covering; chalkboard and bulletin board replacement; re-furnishing and interior door replacement. The major high cost capital improvements may include some of the above items and almost always include construction of additional classroom and instructional space necessary to facilitate planned new uses of existing rural schools

MAINTENANCE

Maintenance of school buildings is generally thought of as being the work necessary to keep the building in as nearly original condition as possible. A board of education decision to repaint the interior of the building is a decision involving maintenance of the facility. The repainting project is aimed to restore the interior walls of the building to their original condition when the building was new and occupied initially. It is not necessarily a modernization or renovation project that expands the value of the physical assets of the building as much as it is a project to bring the interior wall surfaces of the building back to their original condition as nearly as possible. The same reasoning and rationale applies to tuckpointing (repairing concrete joints between brickwork and stonework) comprising the exterior of the building.

Aside from trying to maintain the building in as nearly original condition as possible the rationale for regular maintenance work is to provide a good environment for teaching and learning; hence an improvement to the building so it will facilitate rather than retard achievement of its purpose as a school building. Maintenance is without doubt the most popularly practiced option for improving school facilities. In most rural school districts there is sufficient local craft talent available to do many maintenance projects without assistance of larger contractors. In fact, many individuals who are employed by local school boards as school custodians are sufficiently skilled in the basic craft trades — carpentry, painting, concrete repair, and grounds care — to perform most of the desired routine maintenance work in and around the school buildings.

OPERATIONS

By definition, operations embraces that work necessary to keep a school building operationally ready to its intended purpose. This work is almost always done by school custodians and involves sweeping, cleaning, and supplying the school in a fashion that allows the school building to function like it is supposed to function. For example, the floors are clean, the toilet rooms are supplied with soap and tissue, the windows and doors are operational and clean, the temperature level is appropriate, and drinking fountains are clean and operational, and grounds are well kept and free of debris.

These operational tasks are not within the realm of renovation, capital improvements, or maintenance. Yet, without daily operational care the building itself would stand in the way of effectiveness in teaching and learning. Students and teachers would be expending physical energy trying to adapt to an inappropriate physical environment thereby depleting energy that should be directed to instruction and acquisition of knowledge.

SCHOOL REORGANIZATION

The term school reorganization brings to mind the word consolidation. With rare exception it is an unspoken word in rural localities, a word shunned by legislators, and a word that can obliterate the careers of rural school administrators. However, properly presented it can represent an option which upon adoption can insure a long and healthy future for some rural school districts. Too many people associate the word with school closure and bitter loss. This is indeed unfortunate.

IMPROVING FACILITY UTILIZATION

Facility utilization is a technical term used to state the grades and number of students

housed in a school in relation to the number that could be housed according to the operational capacity and original intention of the building design. Suppose the building was constructed in 1958 as an elementary school for about 240 students in Grades 1 to 6. Today the building houses only 30 students in Grades 7 and 8. The building utilization is only 12.5% of its capacity, only two grades are housed instead of six, and it is being utilized for a purpose vastly different than for what it was designed for originally.

Whether a person is a professional educator or interested citizen the words facility utilization do not need to be fully understood to perceive that the school is a problem. It was not designed originally as a middle school its enrollment is too low and its operation costs are no doubt excessive. What are the options for improvement? Given the obvious dramatic decline in enrollment there is no doubt room at the local high school for students in Grades 7 and 8. The problem cries out for a solution involving a change in how the district school buildings are utilized. The political process for effecting the change is discussed thoroughly in another chapter of this book. For purposes here a general rule is that existing school buildings should be utilized to the fullest extent of their size and design capabilities. Unfortunately, in some rural areas, especially those with aging buildings and declining enrollment, the buildings are often inefficiently utilized and may be housing grades they were never designed to accommodate.

CONSOLIDATION - DECONSOLIDATION

State legislatures are increasingly sensitive to fiscal pressures. School finance occupies a lot of time, is a subject of heated debate, and is addressed regularly by lobbyists. The rural school lobby is active and it represents a powerful political voice in rural states. But rural population is declining accompanied by decline in strength of the traditional rural power block.

As population declines rural school enrollment declines. In most localities the number of people with no school age children exceeds the number with school age children. As the weight of balance tilts more toward adults without school age children adversity to taxes for rural schools intensifies.

Legislators are abundantly aware of these demographics, yet they are reluctant to address school district re-organization and are particularly careful to avoid public discussion of consolidation. Concomitantly, strong forces are advocating limited funding for low enrollment schools as a way to force consolidation while others advocate additional funding because of low enrollment. Ironically, many of these schools are not in sparsely populated areas commonly targeted by proponents of school district consolidation. Many districts that should be consolidated are located in metropolitan counties or in adjacent counties.

Suppose such a county contains six to nine school districts ranging in enrollment from 200 to 4300 students. These school districts might typically contain about 150 square miles each — perhaps 10 miles by 15 miles in size. Suppose two of the lower enrollment districts have a common boundary. Prudence may well suggest merging the high schools into a single building. But, political reality suggests more strongly that leaders remain silent. This kind of thinking is especially prominent among legislators who represent the more populated areas embraced by metropolitan and non-metropolitan adjacent counties some of which contain several school districts of small geographic size and fairly low enrollments. By contrast, picture a rural sparsely populated county of 1500 inhabitants and a 100 student high school. Proponents of consolidation are quick to target these low enrollment rural districts as prime candidates for consolidation with a neighboring school district. The reality is that the neighboring school

district which embraces essentially all of the adjoining county is also sparsely populated and has a 175 student high school. It is true that a new 275 student high school would make a delightful rural school, but the district would cover nearly 1800 square miles and a single high school would result in some students being transported for an hour or more to and from school. The consolidation would represent a poor choice and would be essentially impractical. The only substantial dollar savings would be one superintendent and one principal's salary and maybe some additional personnel reductions. Even if the new school district were fairly poor the savings would not be sufficiently large to justify closure of a high school or the construction cost of a new consolidated high school. If neither building were closed the only substantial savings would be the salary of one superintendent. Generally speaking a single consolidation is often simply impractical from stand- points of education or finance. Furthermore, legislators tend to find such action adverse to acceptable political behavior. Given the foregoing examples, consolidation, while sometimes justified by numbers, is seldom supported emotionally or politically.

If school districts in their present configurations are so zealously supported by their local stakeholders perhaps there is merit in deconsolidating school districts. Deconsolidation seldom makes sense as a rural school facility improvement option. The most notable exception involves school districts with two high schools located in communities that should not have consolidated in the first place. In these situations there is history of too much rivalry and insufficient co-operation between the two communities. The original consolidation was simply a bad union from the outset and was destined ultimately to fail.

Proposals to deconsolidate require state board of education approval. This is usually very

difficult to obtain. Most rural states have experienced a long struggle with consolidation and will not easily back away from gains. However, most rural states are not pushing consolidation agendas. Perhaps the most dramatic periods of consolidation have passed and new ways will become apparent to achieve some of the improvements that supporters of consolidation have so long advocated. It is common today to find adjoining school districts sharing personnel and students for specialized instruction at the high school level. Interactive television and computer delivered instruction may well render consolidation obsolete as a rural school improvement option. Educational service centers and cooperatives now assist rural school administrators with the scheduling, personnel, and technology necessary to provide advanced instruction in a variety of subjects.

Improvements to rural schools through consolidation resulted in broader tax bases, more broadly experienced executive personnel, elimination of obviously inefficient small districts. The singular biggest improvement to school facilities that resulted from consolidation was construction of many new school buildings and modernization of others. In today's typically rural school district consolidation with a neighboring district will not necessarily result in a new building. New buildings are now more likely to result from internal consolidation within rural school districts especially those that are geographically large, have too many buildings, and are experiencing enrollment decline. There is generally sufficient tax base in many of these districts to maintain school buildings in outstanding physical condition. Many people in rural localities place a very high priority on beautiful school buildings. School buildings are points of community pride.

ALTERNATIVE USES OF RURAL SCHOOLS

As discovery and evaluation of options for improving rural school facilities continues new uses for rural schools become apparent. Many of these buildings were constructed in the 1950's and 1960's, most have received uncommonly good care. They are usually located in school districts with sufficient wealth to finance major maintenance or larger capital improvement projects that assure continued use of the school. There are a few exceptions where closure is necessary. When a closure does occur it often clears the way for long lasting improvements that may have otherwise not been possible

PROPRIETY OF CLOSURE

School closures are often unfortunate emotional events that when improperly executed can leave school district patrons and leaders bitterly divided. The resultant wounds can trigger a half-century of bitterness and act as a block to district patron unity and commonality of purpose. The fact remains that it is sometimes best to close a school in order to insure the continued life and success of a school district. Boards of education facing a school closure are well advised to develop the hard data necessary to support a closure, utilize citizen leaders to study such data and concur in the necessity for closure, and show that the closure will ultimately strengthen the school system.

There are several key questions that must be answered to win public support of a school closure and avoid the potential for long lasting damage to future progress. These questions include the following:

1. Will personnel move with the students to another school?
2. Will additional students at the receiving school disturb class size policy?

3. Can some personnel positions be eliminated in sufficient number to effect substantial financial savings?
4. Does the school board have a legal reduction in force (RIF) policy?
5. What will be the public relations impact of a school closure?
6. Will the school closure negatively impact the economy of the community where the building is located?
7. Can personnel elimination be avoided by re-assignment or not filling other positions that may open in the near future?
8. Is there legal recourse for critics to block the closure?
9. Are per student operating costs for the school — heat, light, supplies, insurance, water, sewer, trash removal, personnel — clearly and unreasonably higher than for the other schools?
10. Will the curriculum and activity program at the receiving school be disturbed by the closure?
11. Has a citizen advisory committee been utilized to study the propriety of the closure?
12. Have all options been identified for future use of the building?

It is critically important that these questions be answered along with other questions that may be unique to the pending decision. The capstone questions that must be answered before the final decision is made is whether the closure will clearly be of ultimate benefit to the involved students and will closure facilitate achievement of the school district mission.

CHARTER, MAGNET, AND THEME SCHOOLS

For a variety of political reasons the charter school is achieving very positive public and legislative acceptance. The magnet and theme schools do not require legislative sanction. Contrary to public opinion these more or less special purpose schools are very viable options for utilizing many rural schools. Such schools need not be unique only to large cities and history will no doubt show that some of the most exemplary charter and theme type schools were in rural areas.

One option for improving rural schools is for the local school board to create one of these kinds of special purpose schools. Usually the process requires some very observable facility modifications and improvements. These types of schools are usually housed in formerly poorly utilized school buildings. They may be in communities that have suffered from enrollment decline. Secondly, these buildings have usually enjoyed regular maintenance and good daily care. Most school boards committed to a change in use of a school building will invest in needed additional maintenance and capital improvement work. Tax payers usually support these kinds of projects because they see a viable and long term continued use of their school building and the economic benefit of the operating school to the future of the community and the school district. These uses often bring to a community a recognition of uniqueness which enhances support and strengthens hope for community development.

ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

Like charter schools and theme schools, the alternative school is not necessarily generic to large school districts. Rural school systems also have students at risk of dropout or at risk of experiencing life long frustration from lack of appropriate school experiences. The advantage of

the rural alternative school is twofold. First, more than one school district can be involved in the program. Second, many alternative school students soon become interested in school (often for the first time in their lives) to the point that they will make consistent effort to attend school regularly and report on time.

Relative to facility improvements, the affected school board(s) usually represent a tax base sufficient to make any changes to the school building necessary to accommodate the alternative school program. Involvement of more than one school board has the added advantage of providing a tax base from which to easily finance needed maintenance and capital improvements.

OTHER EDUCATION USES

Housing for educational service centers or special education co-operatives represents another use of rural school buildings in danger of closure and/or re-use as a non-educational facility. In some rural areas where school districts are fairly large an educational service center may serve a geographic area of unusually large size. When this is the case the service center or co-operative board, made up of representatives of several school districts, may select a site for its main office in an unused school building then utilize one or more additional similar buildings as satellite centers. By so doing itinerant specialists can be placed in these satellite locations thereby saving considerable travel time.

It is also important to realize that some smaller rural buildings currently underutilized make excellent centers for housing one to three grades of students district-wide. These types of schools are popular with teachers desiring to work as teams with a few grade levels district-wide in a single building. In some sparsely populated areas transportation can become rather

inconvenient. This problem tends to be offset by the advantages of larger class sizes. Personnel talent can be more efficiently utilized and students become more broadly acquainted with their peers.

Improvements to the former rural school building are usually similar to those listed earlier; and building modifications generally consist of converting classrooms to specialized office, conference, and resource space. Again, the tax base is broad from which to obtain funding for improvements. Moreover, public approval is easy to obtain because the new use continues to assure that the building will remain in active service.

NON-EDUCATION USES

A major political problem for school boards faced with a school closure is the disposition of the closed school building. This problem can result in delay in school district re-organization to the point that continued use of an inefficient school becomes detrimental to the involved students. Forward looking school leaders help their school boards resolve this question well in advance of a decision to close a rural school.

One option is to simply abandon the building. This is indeed a poor choice. If the building has out-lived it usefulness then razing is the preferred choice over abandonment. This issue is generally what delays the re-organization, gets a new school board elected, topples the school district superintendent, and ultimately adversely impacts education of the affected students

Another weak choice finds the board of education deeding the building to the community governing board or council. Usually the receiving community cannot afford to maintain and certainly cannot afford to modernize the building. The community often ends up utilizing only a

small portion of a deteriorating building. The most notable exception is a free-standing gymnasium or all-purpose room that for only minimal cost can be utilized as a community recreational center.

The best use for a school building that is phased out as a school is to convert it to a non-education use. This option assumes the building has some remaining life and is in reasonably good condition. Non-education uses include housing, health care, and light industrial services or manufacturing. Most counties have staff personnel responsible for economic development. Also, most communities affected by a potential school closure have leaders who will join with economic development personnel to locate potential uses of a school building that is about to be closed. There are legal arrangements available whereby a municipality and a school board can agree to make specific repairs or modifications to a building so as to make it more attractive to potential users. Good uses of non-operating school buildings contribute to the economic well-being of the communities where they are situated.

MARKETING RURAL SCHOOLS

One of the more recent occurrences in rural education is the practice of marketing schools to students in neighboring school districts. The practice has some very definite implications for facilities and strategic planning for facility modifications and improvements. Some school leaders and boards of education are very critical of this practice. Others enthusiastically support the practice, especially representatives of school districts actively recruiting students whose place of residence is in a neighboring school district. The debate among affected school district leaders involves largely curricular and instructional program considerations and may involve debate concerning alleged ethical questions where school boards question the propriety of recruiting.

However, the real issue is finance even though it may be complicated by deep seated value conflicts among stakeholders who believe parents are duty bound to send their youngsters to their home district schools.

Most state financial assistance to local school districts is tied to student numbers, and the support dollars tend to flow with the student. This means that regardless of a student's place of residence the state financial support for that youngster's education goes to the school district where the student attends school. The losing district loses its student and the state money that would have accompanied that student. The receiving district grows by one new student and receives the state money that accompanies that student.

Suppose state support dollars for a typical rural school student in a given state is $5,000 and that six such students opt to leave their resident District A to attend school in District B. This means a loss of $30,000 to District A and a gain of $30,000 to District B. If these same six students and their families develop a loyalty to District B and continue to attend school in District B the financial gain to District B would amount to $150,000 within five years. Certainly, six students do not typically require an additional teacher nor would six students trigger a building addition. There is actually no substantial additional cost to the receiving school district unless the students were all in the same grade, and the faculty recommended an additional computer or a teacher assistant.

The practice of students rejecting their home school district to attend school in an adjacent district is a fairly new and dramatic behavior. If substantial numbers of students elect this choice the financial consequence to the losing school districts may contribute to their premature demise. This writer is aware of a rural school district that lost nearly 60 students to

two neighboring districts. The financial drain exceeded $200,000. Even though there were two receiving school districts in this situation both benefitted handsomely by the additional money because both were uncommonly small low enrollment high cost school districts.

Some rural administrators are critical of this practice and critical that the legislature allows dollars to accompany students from their home school districts to neighboring districts. Critics usually become exercised over legislative sanction of school busses crossing boundaries of neighboring school districts. Proponents applaud the emerging practice as a way to strengthen the better rural districts and help eliminate those incapable of providing desired education programs.

School marketing should be thought of as an important component of community economic development. While some school administrators are a little reluctant to become involved, rural school marketing is now an important survival activity and needs to be conducted in co-operation with the community Chamber of Commerce and the community or county office of economic development. These three organizations cannot function independently of each other. Good schools are not found in bad communities any more than bad schools are found in good communities.

Active community marketing is aimed at attracting business but among the first interests of business representatives evaluating a community is the quality of school buildings and educational programs. To staff a new business workers must be willing to relocate to a new community. In periods of economic vibrancy when jobs are plentiful and unemployment is low workers will not relocate unless schools and educational opportunity for their children are readily apparent. It is incumbent upon school leaders to communicate internally with the school staff to

help assure that external communications to the broader public occur regularly and accurately.

Unfortunately, there are large numbers of rural school leaders and teachers as well who simply are not aware of exemplary work being done in their own schools. The stories that accrue from good work in rural schools need to be told regularly to the public generally and to economic development proponents specifically. Communication is part of marketing schools and successful marketing may equate with survival. Many people locate in communities that have good schools. Plainly, good schools attract and are key factors in economic development in rural localities. Some parents are so committed to having their youngsters involved in good rural schools that they will move to a rural community and retain their employment in a nearby larger population center. Let us not view rural school marketing in the restrictive context of recruiting students away from neighboring school districts, but rather in a spirit of attracting families to a school community because of economic and educational advantages.

Implications for improving school buildings are obvious. School boards in districts receiving students whether through active recruiting, by accident of geography, or for other reasons including economic growth are willing to spend to improve the physical adequacy of the school building then advertise the scope of the improvements as a way to attract new enrollees. It is an emerging practice that is beginning to embrace the techniques of private enterprise.

A BRIGHT FUTURE

Rural schools are alive and well. They always have been and their strength will surely continue beyond the foreseeable future. Past school district consolidations actually strengthened rural school districts and schools within those districts. Currently, internal (within district) consolidation is further strengthening rural schools. Also technology is a major contributor to

the success of rural schools today. Alternative uses of underutilized facilities in rural areas undergoing population decline are guaranteeing new life for those buildings.

Options for improving rural school facilities are bing identified, approved, and implemented regularly. The scope of facility improvement to accommodate current and proposed uses of existing facilities and to assure their continued viability varies from simple maintenance repairs to complicated capital improvements such as major modernization or construction of additional instructional space. Also most improvements include direct attention to implementing technologies available to enhance instruction. These range from regular utilization of the Internet to intra-school interaction through the World Wide Web and by interactive television. These kinds of capital and instructional delivery improvements are improving rural school facilities and insuring what is evolving to be a continuously bright and exciting future.

REFERENCES

Roger Baskerville. Toward Community Growth. (Ft. dodge, Iowa; Arrowhead Area Education Agency, 1977) p. 20.

Digest of Education Statistics, 1994 (Washington, D.C.; Department of Education, 1994), Table 90, p.96.